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Device may help preserve languages

Technology was originally developed for use by Army

By Diane Huber

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SHELTON - A hand-held electronic device could help the Squaxin Island Indians - and tribes throughout the country - preserve their native language.

"After the elders pass on, that's it," said Corey (Bear) O'Lague, who lives on the Squaxin reservation and grew up speaking a southern dialect of the language.

He was one of about a dozen people who came to the Squaxin Island Tribe Museum, Library and Research Center Friday for a demonstration of the Phraselator, a tool for revitalizing American Indian languages.

"We could take it to the elders, who still speak the language," O'Lague said.

The Phraselator was developed by a defense company after the Sept. 11 attacks and was first used strictly for soldiers to communicate with non-English speakers.

Don Thornton of California-based Thornton Media Inc. thought the technology would apply well to American Indian tribes, inspired by his own Oklahoma Cherokee background.

Now he and his wife, Kara, travel the country showing off the \$3,300 device. They're working with more than 40 tribes.



Steven M. Herppich/The Olympian
The Phraselator uses voice-activated translation to help revitalize native languages.



Steven M. Herppich/The Olympian
Don Thornton (right) demonstrates the Phraselator to Skokomish tribe member Delbert Miller at the Squaxin Island Museum on Friday.

"If your kids aren't learning the language, then the language is in trouble," Thornton said.

The device looks like an oversized calculator with a computer screen. The user can speak an English phrase or select one on the screen, such as "Hello, how are you?" and "My name is." A male or female recorded voice then speaks the phrase in the tribal language. It also can play back entire prayers or songs. The tribe hopes to purchase some of the devices, museum Director Charlene Krise said.

"It will be important because we have language that has been so diminished" by the introduction of English, she said. "The language for our tribal people has always been extraordinarily important because the language is connected to the land.

Many families speak the tribe's language with their children at home, and preschoolers learn the dances, songs, numbers and ABCs in school, she said. But people her age - from 40 to 60 - have trouble speaking the language.

"We hear it and can understand it, but it's very difficult to speak," she said.

Peter Boome, an Upper Skagit Indian who lives on the Squaxin Island reservation, said he'd like to use the device to teach his four children the tribe's language.

"Language conveys a way of thinking. ... You view the world through your language," he said. "And English is very different than American Indian languages, the thought processes and philosophy."

Words for "fire," for example, convey that it has different forms and is living and moving, he said.

He knows little of his own language, Ute, because his parents' generation went to boarding school and were disciplined for speaking their tribal languages, he said.

Thornton told a similar story about his mother.

Valerie Bellack, a coordinator for the Muckleshoot Language Program, said she will take information on the Phraselator back to her tribe in Auburn.

"I think it's a tool. I don't think in itself it can create a fluent speaker," she said. "With the children, they learn a language by hearing it, so I believe this will be a useful tool for the younger generation."

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On the Web

For information on the Phraselator, go to www.ndnlanguage.com

For information on the Squaxin Island Tribe Museum, Library and Research Center, go to www.squaxinlandmuseum.org

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